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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 04 BAGHDAD 001055

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TAGS: [MOPS](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [IZ](#)
SUBJECT: FALL-OUT FROM IRAQI SPECIAL FORCES RAID NEAR SADR
CITY

REF: BAGHDAD 1023

Classified By: ACTING DEPUTY CHIEF OF MISSION DANIEL SPECKHARD FOR REAS
ONS 1.4 (A), (B), (D)

11. (S) SUMMARY: At approximately 1800 on Sunday, March 26, 2006, Iraqi Special Operations Forces (ISOF) launched an assault on a target in the Ur neighborhood near the Sadr City area of Baghdad. The raid was planned and executed by the Iraqi forces with the assistance of U.S. Special Forces advisors. Persons inside and near the target building reacted with gunfire and a firefight ensued. The ISOF entered the target, killed 16, detained 18, and rescued one Iraqi hostage who had been kidnapped earlier in the day. As a result of inaccurate media reporting public outcry was immediate and widespread, with scenes of the aftermath, including graphic shots of bodies, broadcast late into the night on Iraqi television. Media reports spread the rumor that the building raided was a mosque, and that those killed were innocent worshipers gunned down in cold blood by American soldiers. Government and political leaders including the Prime Minister and Ministers of Defense and Interior quickly denounced the raid and claimed Iraqi forces were not involved. Demands for an investigation and compensation were made. On March 27, Baghdad provincial officials boycotted planned meetings with Embassy officials, and the Shia Alliance walked out of government formation talks in protest. By March 28, local media interest in the event had died down. Shia Alliance figures returned to government formation talks, but the Provincial Council was still boycotting Embassy officers. Ambassador and MNF-I Commanding General have been in frequent contact with Iraqi officials to convey the facts surrounding the operation and to calm emotions. On March 30 the Baghdad Governor and Provincial Council chairman were talking to us again (SEPTEL.) Talks about the nature and scope of a possible investigation continue. END SUMMARY.

DETAILS OF THE RAID

12. (S) On March 14, three ISOF soldiers were sent in plain clothes to an area near Sadr City to reconnoiter a site where numerous executed bodies have been dumped. They fell into hostile hands and were brutally tortured before being executed. The ISOF unit began to gather intelligence to determine who was responsible. The information they obtained pointed them to a school building complex in the Ur neighborhood, just northwest of Sadr City. Their information indicated the building in which their suspects were located was a heavily defended structure no longer in use as a school building. ISOF information also indicated the presence of a high value individual; a former Jaysh al-Mahdi commander wanted for attacks against Coalition Forces. (NOTE: Senior Iraqi military officers have subsequently told us that the

building in question was used as an office by the Ba'ath party during the Saddam regime. Following the fall of Saddam it was converted to use as a political office and as a husayniyah. A husayniyah, a facility unique to the Shia, serves as a religious and social function community center. END NOTE.) The building was watched for several days and further intelligence was gathered. Information available to ISOF and to their U.S. advisors indicated the building was not a mosque, a husayniyah, or sensitive site. Current MNF-I rules of engagement allow for entry into mosques or places of worship if there is a reasonable belief that the facility contains enemy forces.

13. (S) The raid was launched at 1800 hours on March 26. Approximately 50 ISOF soldiers participated, along with about 25 U.S. forces. The ISOF was in the lead. Upon their arrival outside the target, they were immediately fired upon from several buildings across the street. As they dismounted their vehicles, fire began coming from inside the target building. The ISOF assaulted the building, gained entry, and killed all those they encountered who were shooting at them. A total of 16 people in the building were killed. Eighteen occupants of the building who did not pose a threat (i.e., those who were not bearing a weapon) were detained. In addition, the soldiers found an individual who was hog-tied, a dental technician who said he had been kidnapped earlier in the day and who was told by his kidnappers that they planned to kill him later that evening. He subsequently identified two of the detainees as being among those who had kidnapped him.

14. (S) Throughout the time the soldiers were at the target, those manning the outer cordon continued to be fired upon from positions on surrounding buildings. Crowds of people

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began to arrive and were in a highly agitated state. The ISOF determined the situation required them to leave the scene quickly, before they could secure the bodies of those killed. Prior to departing, they did destroy on scene the weapons and bomb-making equipment they had discovered in the building. These included 32 AK-47 rifles, five grenades, four rocket propelled grenades with two launchers, two RPK heavy machine guns, crush wire improvised explosive device detonators, and several sets of body armor. There were no religious articles found. The only friendly casualties suffered by the assault force was a gunshot wound to the arm of an ISOF soldier. The entire episode lasted approximately 35 minutes.

MEDIA REACTION

15. (SBU) Because the ISOF were required to depart the scene before securing the bodies, people with video cameras were able to enter the building and take photos of the bodies and the condition of the building. These scenes immediately made it into the hands of the local media, who began showing them on television in reports claiming that those slain were innocent worshipers gunned down by American soldiers. Al-Iraqiya reported that U.S. forces attacked a husayniyah in the Ur neighborhood of Baghdad killing an unspecified number of people. Other Iraqi and pan-Arab networks including al-Massar, al-Furat, al-Sharqiya, al-Arabiya, al-Jazirah, and others, quickly picked up the story. Iraqiya's Sunday evening coverage focused on images of corpses, reported to be the victims of a U.S. attack on a mosque. Al-Jazirah showed similar images, but also reported comments from a CENTCOM spokesperson emphasizing that U.S. forces played an advisory role to the ISOF who had conducted the raid.

16. (SBU) Hostile commentary from Iraqi political figures continued on Iraqi broadcast media on Monday. Iraqi officials, including Interior Minister Bayan Jabr and Hadyar al-Abbadi, advisor to the Prime Minister, demanded

explanations and investigations into the incident. Defense Minister Saadoun al-Dulime, a Sunni, denied Ministry of Defense (MOD) involvement in the operation, while Jabr also denied involvement of his forces, claiming that the MOD and MNF-I had control of the area in which the incident occurred.

Furat reported that U.S. forces "broke into" the husayniyah and quoted Iraqi parliamentarian and leader of Hezhollah movement in Iraq, Hassan al-Sari, who blamed U.S. Ambassador Khalilzad for the attack. By Monday evening, Arabiya was reporting that President Talabani announced the formation of a committee, which he would head, to investigate the attack. Iraqiya's evening broadcast showed images of Ur neighborhood residents mourning those killed on Sunday.

¶7. (SBU) While the story broke in the print media on Tuesday morning, it had lost steam in the broadcast media and was eclipsed on the pan-Arab networks by the Khartoum Summit and Israeli elections. Iraqi networks shifted attention back to government formation talks with a press conference as President Talabani's house. The Coalition views of the incident was further clarified at a press conference, whose presentation included video and slides of the incident. By Tuesday afternoon, the story was no longer the focus of Iraqi media attention.

SHIA LEADERS STONGLY CONDEMN THE MILITARY OPERATION

¶8. (SBU) After the operation in Ur concluded and the aftermath was televised, but before all of the facts were known, Shia leaders took to the airwaves to condemn the operation and call for an investigation. Sadrist spokesman Shaykh Abd al-Hadi al-Darraji told al-Arabiyah that "U.S. troops went in and opened fire on the worshipers." He added that there was "no justification" and claimed that "going into mosque or husayniyahs on the pretext that there were weapons inside them was a grave mistake." Haydar al-Abbadi, advisor to Prime Minister Ja'afari, told al-Arabiyah March 27 that "there should not be death squads working alongside the U.S. troops which execute people while they are praying without any reason," adding that "most of these death squads may have connections with the multinational forces." That same day, again with al-Arabiyah, senior Da'wa leader Jawad al-Maliki deemed the attacks "an ugly crime" and "an organized crime that has serious political and security dimensions which seek to trigger civil war to serve political ends aimed at manipulating current political formulas during critical political circumstances." Da'wa Tanzim leader

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Khudair al-Khuz'ai told western media March 26 that U.S. forces raided their party office, "tortured" the men, dragged them out and "executed" them.

¶9. (C) Khudair al-Khuz'ai angrily claimed to PolCouns March 27 that Da'wa Tanzim used the same building as the husayniyah that was attacked, but the building is a duplex, and the Da'wa Tanzim space was separate and has a separate entrance. He claimed that Da'wa Tanzim was holding a cultural meeting marking the death of the Prophet at the time of the raid - and that American and/or Iraqi forces burst in and shot 13 Tanzim members dead. He underlined that these people had no relation to the Jaysh al-Mahdi ("we're Da'wa Tanzim! You know who we are!") He said he could not understand the timing of the raid and asked why it was conducted during prayer times. PolCouns emphasized that the raid was conducted against an illegal armed group, but Khuz'ai would have none of it.

¶10. (S) Moqtada al-Sadr called a meeting late on March 26 with his clerics and security forces. During this meeting he insisted that all JAM members show restraint, but maintain vigilance. Sadr placed these forces on "high alert." He also ordered members of the JAM to travel north to help secure Sadr City and roads likely to be used by pilgrims headed

south to Najaf to mark the death of Mohammed. Sadr also said that it was time to apply pressure to the national government to condemn the acts of aggression against his followers and to act to stop such attacks.

¶11. (C) Shia Independent and Council of Representatives (CoR) member Muhammad Izz al-Din al-Khateeb told PolOff and PolFSN March 27 that the force used at the Ur building was excessive, even if the people were armed. What happened is unexplainable, he stated. He stated his disbelief that Iraqi soldiers were in the lead. He then complained that the Association of Muslim Scholars (AMS) and Sunni mosques harbor insurgents and weapons, but there are no operations against their mosques like what happened in Ur. Fellow Shia Independent and CoR member Dr. Haider Karim al-Suweidi added at the meeting that the Shia street is saying that Americans sensed the political process was moving ahead and wanted to hinder the process. Shia Independent and CoR member Haider Subkhi al-Jurani told PolOff and PolFSN March 28 that there should not be attacks on militias while hotbeds of insurgents/terrorists exist.

¶12. (C) As a result of the assault, Shia coalition members angrily boycotted government formation talks scheduled for Monday. However, the meetings resumed on Tuesday. The Baghdad Provincial Council which on March 27 had declared it would no longer meet with U.S. officials on March 30 sent the Baghdad Governor and Provincial Council Chair to meetings with U.S. officials in the International Zone. (See SEPTTEL.) Shia parliamentarian and frequent media commentator Abbas al-Baati told us March 30 that the raid struck a raw nerve among the Shia. However, he recognized the utility of putting the incident behind us.

ATTEMPTS TO CLARIFY

¶13. (S) Since Monday, Embassy and MNF-I officials have been engaged at the highest levels with Iraqi counterparts to clarify the facts of what really took place. On Monday afternoon, GEN Casey met personally with Minister of Defense Dulime, Minister of Interior Jabr, and National Security Advisor Dr. Mowaffak al-Rubaie and provided a detailed briefing of the operation. Dulime and Jabr expressed satisfaction with the outcome of the raid, but made it clear they could not speak out in public for political reasons. Jabr and Dulime also said they had known for some time that the building in question was a site used by kidnappers to torture and execute people, with Jabr saying that eight intelligence officers had been killed several months earlier in the same building. This was confirmed by Dulime, who later told Acting PolMilCous that the building housed an illegal Sharia court. Both, along with Rubaie, said the decision about how to handle the media and political aspects of the operation would have to be taken by Prime Minister Ja'afari. Dulime counseled that it would be best to say nothing to the press, predicting that after a few days the matter would be forgotten. Following his meeting with the three, GEN Casey provided a similar briefing to Ja'afari. This was followed by a meeting between Ja'afari and the Ambassador. (REFTEL) Following demands by Ja'afari, Talibani, and others for an investigation, Embassy and MNF-I are exploring with Iraqi counterparts possible options.

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COMMENT

¶14. (C) While senior Iraqi officials are willing to admit in private that the operation was a tactical success, they are unwilling for political reasons to support it in public. In addition, in Dulime's case, the fact that he did not know about it in advance and rushed to condemn it in public now

makes it impossible for him to admit that MOD forces were involved. To do so would make him look foolish and uninformed about what his own soldiers are doing. Even if he had known about it, Dulime is extremely averse to taking any action against Shia militias by what are considered - rightly or wrongly - to be "Sunni-controlled" forces.

¶15. (C) Sadr's muted reaction and calls for restraint reinforces the message provided to the media that the raid was unjustifiable, while providing cover for JAM actions that continue to be used against its opponents as well as potential action against CF. It is also likely that Sadr will use the opportunity to leverage the Iraqi Government to provide permission to expand JAM operations in Baghdad.

¶16. (C) From a political standpoint, the operation came when important elements of the Shia Islamist Coalition were dissatisfied with American pressure against Prime Minister Jafari in the government formation process and suspicious of American motives in our discussions with Sunni Arabs. For some, the operation confirmed their worst suspicions that the U.S. would not remain a neutral party in Iraq's sectarian conflict. For others, the operation provided a golden opportunity to burnish their credentials as Iraqi nationalists by bashing the U.S. However, we sense the turbulence is subsiding slightly. Public denunciations about the attack were fewer on March 28 and the Shia Coalition was back working on the government talks. The anger, and the political opportunism, are not gone, however, and another operation against a Shia militia element very likely will cause another uproar.

KHALILZAD